

CHAPTER XII

SOME LETTERS FOR GINGER

Laurette et Cie.,
Regent Street,
London, W.,
England.

January 21st.

DEAR GINGER,—I'm feeling better. As it's three months since I last wrote to you, no doubt you will say to yourself that I would be a poor, weak-minded creature if I wasn't. I suppose one ought to be able to get over anything in three months. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I haven't quite succeeded in doing that, but at least I have managed to get my troubles stowed away in the cellar, and I'm not dragging them out and looking at them all the time. That's something, isn't it?

I ought to give you all my impressions of London, I suppose; but I've grown so used to the place that I don't think I have any now. I seem to have been here years and years.

You will see by the address that Mr. Faucitt has not yet sold his inheritance. He expects to do so very soon, he tells me—there is a rich-looking man with

whiskers and a keen eye whom he is always lurching with, and I think big deals are in progress. 'Poor dear! he is crazy to get away into the country and settle down and grow ducks and things. London has disappointed him. It is not the place it used to be. Until quite lately, when he grew resigned, he used to wander about in a disconsolate sort of way, trying to locate the landmarks of his youth. (He has not been in England for nearly thirty years!) The trouble is, it seems, that about once in every thirty years a sort of craze for change comes over London, and they paint a shop-front red instead of blue, and that upsets the returned exile dreadfully. Mr. Faucitt feels like Rip Van Winkle. His first shock was when he found that the Empire was a theatre now instead of a music-hall. Then he was told that another music-hall, the Tivoli, had been pulled down altogether. And when on top of that he went to look at the baker's shop in Rupert Street, over which he had lodgings in the 'eighties, and discovered that it had been turned into a dressmaker's, he grew very melancholy, and only cheered up a little when a lovely magenta fog came on and showed him that some things were still going along as in the good old days.

I am kept quite busy at Laurette et Cie., thank goodness. (Not being a French scholar like you—do you remember Jules?—I thought at first that Cie was the name of the junior partner, and looked forward to meeting him. "Miss Nicholas, shake hands with Mr. Cie, one of your greatest admirers.") I hold down the female equivalent of your job at the Fillmore Nicholas Theatrical Enterprises Ltd.—that is to say, I'm a sort of right-hand woman. I hang around and sidle up to the customers when they

come in, and say, "Chawming weather, moddom!" (which is usually a black lie) and pass them on to the staff, who do the actual work. I shouldn't mind going on like this for the next few years, but Mr. Faucitt is determined to sell. I don't know if you are like that, but every other Englishman I've ever met seems to have an ambition to own a house and lot in Loamshire or Hants or Salop or somewhere. Their one object in life is to make some money and "buy back the old place"—which was sold, of course, at the end of act one to pay the heir's gambling debts.

Mr. Faucitt, when he was a small boy, used to live in a little village in Gloucestershire, near a place called Cirencester—at least, it isn't: it's called Cister, which I bet you didn't know—and after forgetting about it for fifty years, he has suddenly been bitten by the desire to end his days there, surrounded by pigs and chickens. He took me down to see the place the other day. Oh, Ginge., this English country! Why any of you ever live in towns I can't think. Old, old grey stone houses with yellow haystacks and lovely squelchy muddy lanes and great fat trees and blue hills in the distance. The peace of it! If ever I sell my soul, I shall insist on the devil giving me at least forty years in some English country place in exchange.

Perhaps you will think from all this that I am too much occupied to remember your existence. Just to show how interested I am in you, let me tell you that, when I was reading the paper a week ago, I happened to see the headline, "International Match." It didn't seem to mean anything at first, and then I suddenly recollected. This was the thing you had

once been a snip for! So I went down to a place called Twickenham, where this football game was to be, to see the sort of thing you used to do before I took charge of you and made you a respectable right-hand man. There was an enormous crowd there, and I was nearly squeezed to death, but I bore it for your sake. I found out that the English team were the ones wearing white shirts, and that the ones in red were the Welsh. I said to the man next to me, after he had finished yelling himself black in the face, "Could you kindly inform me which is the English scrum-half?" And just at that moment the players came quite near where I was, and about a dozen assassins in red hurled themselves violently on top of a meek-looking little fellow who had just fallen on the ball. Ginger, you are well out of it! *That* was the scrum-half, and I gathered that that sort of thing was a mere commonplace in his existence. Stopping a rush, it is called, and he is expected to do it all the time. The idea of you ever going in for such brutal sports! You thank your stars that you are safe on your little stool in Fillmore's outer office, and that, if anybody jumps on top of you now, you can call a cop. Do you mean to say you really used to do these dare-devil feats? You must have hidden depths in you which I have never suspected.

As I was taking a ride down Piccadilly the other day on top of a bus, I saw somebody walking along who seemed familiar. It was Mr. Carmyle. So he's back in England again. He didn't see me, thank goodness. I don't want to meet anybody just at present who reminds me of New York.

Thanks for telling me all the news, but please don't do it again. It makes me remember, and I don't

want to. It's this way, Ginger. Let me write to you, because it really does relieve me, but don't answer my letters. Do you mind? I'm sure you'll understand.

So Fillmore and Gladys Winch are married! From what I have seen of her, it's the best thing that has ever happened to Brother F. She is a splendid girl. I must write to him . . .

Laurette et Cie.,

March 12th.

London.

DEAR GINGER,—I saw in a Sunday paper last week that "The Primrose Way" had been produced in New York, and was a great success. Well, I'm very glad. But I don't think the papers ought to print things like that. It's unsettling.

Next day, I did one of those funny things you do when you're feeling blue and lonely and a long way away from everybody. I called at your club and asked for you! Such a nice old man in uniform at the desk said in a fatherly way that you hadn't been in lately, and he rather fancied you were out of town, but would I take a seat while he inquired. He then summoned a tiny boy, also in uniform, and the child skipped off chanting, "Mister Kemp! Mister Kemp!" in a shrill treble. It gave me such an odd feeling to hear your name echoing in the distance. I felt so ashamed for giving them all that trouble; and when the boy came back I slipped twopence into his palm, which I suppose was against all the rules, though he seemed to like it.

Mr. Faucitt has sold the business and retired to the country, and I am rather at a loose end . . .

Monk's Crofton,
(whatever that means)
 Much Middleford,
 Salop,
(slang for Shropshire)
 England.

April 18th.

DEAR GINGER,—What's the use? What is the use? I do all I can to get right away from New York, and New York comes after me and tracks me down in my hiding-place. A week or so ago, as I was walking down the Strand in an aimless sort of way, out there came right on top of me—who do you think? Fillmore, arm in arm with Mr. Carmyle! I couldn't dodge. In the first place, Mr. Carmyle had seen me; *in the second place, it is a day's journey to dodge poor dear Fillmore now.* I blushed for him, Ginger! Right there in the Strand I blushed for him. In my worst dreams I had never pictured him so enormous. Upon what meat doth this our Fillmore feed that he is grown so great? Poor Glacys! When she looks at him she must feel like a bigamist.

Apparently Fillmore is still full of big schemes, for he talked airily about buying all sorts of English plays. He has come over, as I suppose you know, to arrange about putting on "The Primrose Way" over here. He is staying at the Savoy, and they took me off there to lunch, whooping joyfully as over a strayed lamb. It was the worst thing that could possibly have happened to me. Fillmore talked Broadway without a pause, till by the time he had worked his way past the French pastry and was lolling back, breathing a little stertorously, waiting for the coffee

and liqueurs, he had got me so homesick that, if it hadn't been that I didn't want to make a public exhibition of myself, I should have broken down and howled. It was crazy of me ever to go near the Savoy. Of course, it's simply an annex to Broadway. There were Americans at every table as far as the eye could reach. I might just as well have been at the Actor.

Well, if Fate insists in bringing New York to England for my special discomfiture, I suppose I have got to put up with it. I just let events take their course, and I have been drifting ever since. Two days ago I drifted here. Mr. Carmyle invited Fillmore—he seems to love Fillmore—and me to Monk's Crofton, and I hadn't even the shadow of an excuse for refusing. So I came, and I am now sitting writing to you in an enormous bedroom with an open fire and armchairs and every other sort of luxury. Fillmore is out golfing. He sails for New York on Saturday on the *Mauretania*. I am horrified to hear from him that, in addition to all his other big schemes, he is now promoting a fight for the light-weight championship in Jersey City, and guaranteeing enormous sums to both boxers. It's no good arguing with him. If you do, he simply quotes figures to show the fortunes other people have made out of these things. Besides, it's too late now, anyway. As far as I can make out, the fight is going to take place in another week or two. All the same, it makes my flesh creep.

Well, it's no use worrying, I suppose. Let's change the subject. Do you know Monk's Crofton? Probably you don't, as I seem to remember hearing something said about it being a recent purchase. Mr. Carmyle bought it from some lord or other who had

been losing money on the Stock Exchange. I hope you haven't seen it, anyway, because I want to describe it at great length. I want to pour out my soul about it. Ginger, what has England ever done to deserve such paradises? I thought, in my ignorance, that Mr. Faucitt's Cissister place was pretty good, but it doesn't even begin. It can't compete. Of course, his is just an ordinary country house, and this is a Seat. Monk's Crofton is the sort of place they used to write about in the English novels. You know. "The sunset was falling on the walls of G— Castle, in B—shire, hard by the picturesque village of H—, and not a stone's throw from the hamlet of J—" I can imagine Tennyson's Maud living here. It is one of the stately homes of England; how beautiful they stand, and I'm crazy about it.

You motor up from the station, and after you have gone about three miles, you turn in at a big iron gate with stone posts on each side with stone beasts on them. Close by the gate is the cutest little house with an old man inside it who pops out and touches his hat. This is only the lodge, really, but you think you have arrived; so you get all ready to jump out, and then the car goes rolling on for another fifty miles or so through beech woods full of rabbits and open meadows with deer in them. Finally, just as you think you are going on for ever, you whizz round a corner, and there's the house. You don't get a glimpse of it till then, because the trees are too thick.

It's very large, and sort of low and square, with a kind of tower at one side and the most fascinating upper porch sort of thing with battlements. I suppose in the old days you used to stand on this and drop molten lead on visitors' heads. Wonderful

lawns all round, and shrubberies and a lake that you can just see where the ground dips beyond the fields. Of course it's too early yet for them to be out, but to the left of the house there's a place where there will be about a million roses when June comes round, and all along the side of the rose-garden is a high wall of old red brick which shuts off the kitchen garden. I went exploring there this morning. It's an enormous place, with hot-houses and things, and there's the cunningest farm at one end with a stable yard full of puppies that just tear the heart out of you, they're so sweet. And a big, sleepy cat, which sits and blinks in the sun and lets the puppies run all over her. And there's a lovely stillness, and you can hear everything growing. And thrushes and blackbirds . . . Oh, Ginger, it's heavenly!

But there's a catch. It's a case of "Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile." At least, not exactly vile, I suppose, but terribly stodgy. I can see now why you couldn't hit it off with the Family. Because I've seen 'em all! They're here! Yes, Uncle Donald and all of them. Is it a habit of your family to collect in gangs, or have I just happened to stumble into an accidental Old Home Week? When I came down to dinner the first evening, the drawing-room was full to bursting point—not simply because Fillmore was there, but because there were uncles and aunts all over the place. I felt like a small lion in a den of Daniels. I know exactly now what you mean about the Family. They *look* at you! Of course, it's all right for me, because I am snowy white clear through, but I can just imagine what it must have been like for you with your permanently guilty conscience. You must have had an awful time.

By the way, it's going to be a delicate business getting this letter through to you—rather like carrying the despatches through the enemy's lines in a Civil War play. You're supposed to leave letters on the table in the hall, and someone collects them in the afternoon and takes them down to the village on a bicycle. But, if I do that some aunt or uncle is bound to see it, and I shall be an object of loathing, for it is no light matter, my lad, to be caught having correspondence with a human Jimson weed like you. It would blast me socially. At least, so I gather from the way they behaved when your name came up at dinner last night. Somebody mentioned you, and the most awful roasting party broke loose, Uncle Donald acting as cheer-leader. I said feebly that I had met you and had found you part human, and there was an awful silence till they all started at the same time to show me where I was wrong, and how cruelly my girlish inexperience had deceived me. A young and innocent half-portion like me, it appears, is absolutely incapable of suspecting the true infamy of the dregs of society. You aren't fit to speak to the likes of me, being at the kindest estimate little more than a blot on the human race. I tell you this in case you may imagine you're popular with the Family. You're not.

So I shall have to exercise a good deal of snaky craft in smuggling this letter through. I'll take it down to the village myself if I can sneak away. But it's going to be pretty difficult, because for some reason I seem to be a centre of attraction. Except when I take refuge in my room, hardly a moment passes without an aunt or an uncle popping out and having a cosy talk with me. It sometimes seems as though

they were weighing me in the balance. Well, let 'em weigh!

Time to dress for dinner now. Good-bye.

Yours in the balance,

SALLY.

P.S.—You were perfectly right about your Uncle Donald's moustache, but I don't agree with you that it is more his misfortune than his fault. I think he does it on purpose.

(Just for the moment)

Monk's Crofton,
Much Middleford,
Salop,
England.

April 20th.

DEAR GINGER,—Leaving here to-day. In disgrace. Hard, cold looks from the family. Strained silences. Uncle Donald far from chummy. You can guess what has happened. I might have seen it coming. I can see now that it was in the air all along.

Fillmore knows nothing about it. He left just before it happened. I shall see him very soon, for I have decided to come back and stop running away from things any longer. It's cowardly to skulk about over here. Besides, I'm feeling so much better that I believe I can face the ghosts. Anyway, I'm going to try. See you almost as soon as you get this.

I shall mail this in London, and I suppose it will come over by the same boat as me. It's hardly worth writing, really, of course, but I have sneaked up to my room to wait till the motor arrives to take me to

the station, and it's something to do. I can hear muffled voices. The Family talking me over, probably. Saying they never really liked me all along. Oh, well!

Yours moving in an orderly manner to the exit,

SALLY.